

Divine Energies and Divine Action

Exploring the Essence-Energies Distinction

DAVID BRADSHAW



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Published in the United States of America by IOTA Publications with the support of the Theology Department at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota. IOTA Publications is a part of the International Orthodox Theological Association (IOTA). IOTA is a community of scholars, clergy, and professionals dedicated to the dissemination of knowledge within the context of the Orthodox tradition. IOTA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, registered in the State of Illinois.

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Text and cover design: Klaas Wolterstorff / kwbookdesign.com
Cover image: St. Peter Raising Tabitha, Palatine Chapel, Palermo, Sicily
Paul Williams–funkyfood London / Alamy Stock Photo

Divine Energies and Divine Action: Exploring the Essence-Energies Distinction /
by David Bradshaw.
ISBN: 978-1-7352951-5-2 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-7352951-6-9 (e-book)

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Foreword

In contemporary Orthodox theology, the essence-energies distinction is often mentioned, but rarely understood. Even rarer is the work that treats the celebrated distinction with clarity, grace, and philosophical sophistication. David Bradshaw's groundbreaking work will reward even the most demanding reader in all three respects. The book is lucidly and elegantly written. Its argument never feels forced. Its main contribution is to demonstrate that the essence-energies distinction is philosophically defensible, theologically foundational, and spiritually beneficial.

As an intellectual historian, Bradshaw offers ample evidence for the prominence of *ousia/energeia* language in the history of Greek philosophy, beginning with Aristotle. He discusses this evidence in a historically nuanced and theologically constructive way with a view of establishing the essence-energies distinction's cogency in the Eastern Christian tradition.

The first abiding contribution of this work is its discussion of the uses of *energeia/energein* in the New Testament. Among other things, Bradshaw points out that the interpretation of Galatians 5:6 ("faith working through love") had important implications for the Reformation debates about the salvific character of faith. In this and many other respects, the book both builds upon and moves beyond the author's influential monograph, *Aristotle East and West* (2004).

In the following chapter, Bradshaw focuses on the aporia of how the divine glory is something that both is and is not God. He points out a dearth of analysis of this concept in the history of western Christian philosophy. The situation was different for the Greek East, where the Cappadocian Fathers provided a philosophical framework for the divine glory by articulating the

essence-energies distinction and by understanding divine glory as the divine energies rather than the divine essence.

Bradshaw also rigorously focuses on the ways in which the essence-energies distinction was understood to be conceptual and the ways in which it was understood to be real. The contemporary discussion of this central issue is significantly clarified and advanced by the author's meticulous and penetrating analysis, as well as by his illuminating survey of the history of conceptual/real distinction in the Greek East and the Latin West. Not only the Cappadocians and John of Damascus, but also Aquinas and Scotus are treated with due depth and rigor. While Bradshaw is critical of the Latin Doctors, he resists the temptation—common to many contemporary Orthodox scholars—of turning scholasticism into a convenient foil. Equally valuable is the fact that the reader never feels lost in the history of philosophy as Bradshaw's narrative builds towards a robust constructive thesis regarding the essence-energies distinction, culminating in the theology of St. Gregory Palamas.

The following chapters are equally rewarding, especially in the discussion of the relationship between the doctrine of the divine *logoi*, as developed by St. Maximus the Confessor, and the Palamite teaching about the energies. The coherence and explanatory power of Palamas's thought are brought out quite forcefully. The result is a philosophically cogent and spiritually profound teaching about divine agency, where the distinctiveness and the strengths of the Greek patristic approach to the divine essence and its energies are convincingly demonstrated.

The final chapters are more exploratory and constructive. In the Afterword, Bradshaw addresses some criticisms of his previous work and seeks to articulate the central concepts of the book with even greater precision. For example, he points out that it is not completely accurate to understand the distinction between the divine essence and the divine energies as that between what God is in himself and how God manifests himself to creatures. There are divine energies that are indeed such manifestations. However, natural energies belong to God as he exists in himself. Having made this important qualification regarding the natural energies, Bradshaw then raises perhaps the most difficult question of all: just how are we to understand the divine essence? Given the epistemological constraints on the knowability of the divine essence, the question is often avoided. As Bradshaw points out, in the patristic writings, the divine essence is treated as equivalent to the Father, as what is shared between the three persons of the Trinity, and as the source of divine energies. In order to understand how these aspects of

the essence could hold together, Bradshaw proposes a new analogy, which I will let the readers discover for themselves. Importantly, the limitations of the analogy are also discussed extensively.

Readers will find a gold mine of philosophical and theological treasures in this volume. The detractors of the essence-energies doctrine will benefit from reading this volume as much as the doctrine's defenders. No informed argument for or against the doctrine, especially in the developed form that it received in Palamas's theology, will henceforth be possible without consulting Bradshaw's groundbreaking work.

PAUL GAVRILYUK

IOTA Publications, Founder and Managing Editor

Epiphany 2023

The publication of this work is made possible thanks to the generous assistance of the Theology Department at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Preface

The distinction between the unknowable divine essence and the divine energies that “come down to us” and can be known through experience is central to Eastern Orthodox theology. It provides the basic structure for Orthodox thought about the relationship of God to the world, and thereby for a range of topics such as the knowledge of God, theological language, the divine presence in creation, and the nature of deification. It also plays a significant role in Orthodox teaching about the intra-Trinitarian relations.

I first became aware of the distinction some forty years ago while reading the works of Vladimir Lossky, Fr. John Meyendorff, and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware. They made a number of claims on its behalf that I found then, and still find today, both true and important. Most prominently, they affirmed that only such a distinction can do justice to the transcendence and unknowability of God, on the one hand, and God’s immanence within creation and within human life, on the other. They also suggested that the absence of such a distinction had led to many of the problems that are endemic to western Christianity. This too I found (and still find) an exciting and powerful idea, however much it may need to be qualified in various ways.

Yet even at this early stage, I had questions to which the works I had read offered no answer. One was what to make of the idea, much emphasized by these authors, that every essence has some natural energy by which it is made manifest. In philosophy a stock example of an entity with an essence is a triangle, whose essence is to be a three-sided planar figure. Yet a triangle has no natural energy. Evidently the term “essence” was being used in a different sense from that to which I was accustomed—but what was this sense? No one, at least in the works I had read, had even raised this simple question. I also had reservations about the term “energy.” In Aristotle

energeia typically means “activity” or “actuality.” Could one safely assume that it meant “energy” in later authors, and if so, how did it come to take on this new meaning? Indeed, how could one speak of a divine energy without importing quasi-physical connotations as one would, say, in speaking of a divine matter or divine place?

It was with the aim of answering such questions that I wrote *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*, which appeared in 2004. The first chapter included here is a summary of the main themes of this book, written so as to highlight what I see as the fundamental importance of the concept of the divine energies. Even as I was writing this article, however, I began to be aware of further topics that needed to be addressed. One was raised by the undergraduate mentor who had led me to Orthodoxy, Dr. Ward Allen, an English professor and specialist in Renaissance biblical translation. He pointed out that although I had treated St. Paul’s use of *energeia*, I had said nothing about his use of the verb *energein*, and that the two really ought to be viewed as a unity. This led to the line of investigation whose results are presented in the second essay in this volume, “The Divine Energies in the New Testament.” Writing this essay convinced me that the concept of the divine energy is even more thoroughly biblical than I had realized, and I have tried to emphasize this point whenever possible in my subsequent work.

Another topic that I came to realize I had not treated adequately was the divine natural energies. Two issues especially called out for clarification: how are such energies different from others, such as the gifts of the Spirit and the divine *logoi*; and how can they be (as Palamas says) “indicative” and “characteristic” of the divine nature, without furnishing knowledge of that nature? I have addressed these issues briefly in “The Divine Processions and the Divine Energies” and more fully in the Afterword to the present volume. As will be seen in the Afterword, to understand the divine natural energies requires a reconsideration of what early Christian authors meant in speaking of the divine essence. The latter question in turn has led me to a new formulation of the essence-energies distinction as a whole, one that I believe does justice to its considerable complexities. Thus the essays in this volume exhibit a certain progression in my thought following the book: from fuller attention to the biblical sources, to a more careful consideration of the divine natural energies, to greater attention to the concept of the divine essence, and finally to a comprehensive reformulation of the essence-energies distinction.

Two other essays (“Essence and Energies: What Kind of Distinction?”

and “In Defense of the Essence-Energies Distinction: A Reply to Critics”) attempt to clear away persistent misunderstandings about the distinction, including the tendency to subsume it under one of the types of distinction recognized by the medieval scholastics. I argue that the essence-energies distinction is *sui generis*, a point that should also be clear from the discussion in the Afterword. An additional essay, “Perceiving Nature as It Is: The Divine *Logoi* and the Divine Energies,” is more exploratory, attempting to draw on the concept of the divine energies to understand the ways that perception can be transformed through moral and spiritual practices.

Despite the alteration in my views described here, there is little in the previously published essays that I would wish to retract. The essays are reprinted unaltered except for a few small changes to clarify points that had been treated too briefly or to add updated references, which have been placed in brackets. Several quotations of primary sources have been removed to avoid needless repetition; even so, it has proven impossible to avoid all repetition, a fact for which I must beg the reader’s indulgence. Translations are my own except where noted. Generally speaking, Greek has been left in the original characters when cited as Greek and transliterated when it is essential to the flow of an English sentence.

These essays could not have been written without the many friends who have raised objections, suggested texts to read, and in other ways provided encouragement and support. Without excluding many others, I wish particularly to thank Harold Weatherby, Fr. Damaskinos (Tom) Bole, Bruce Foltz, Rico Vitz, Fr. John Jones, Brian Patrick Mitchell, Stoyan Tanev, Marius Portaru, Nathan Jacobs, Mark Spencer, Fr. Christiaan Kappes, Tikhon Pino, Beau Branson, and Fr. Nikolaos Loudovikos. I also wish to thank Paul Gavrilyuk for generously offering to publish this volume, reading it closely, and making detailed suggestions, and Erika Zabinski for bringing the references into a uniform format and in other ways shepherding it through the press.

Since *Aristotle East and West* was published, a number of other scholars have taken up work on the essence-energies distinction. I report on some of the results in the Afterword. Nonetheless, the distinction remains little known or understood outside of Orthodoxy. My hope is that the studies collected here will help inspire others to delve into this fascinating and still widely misunderstood subject.

DAVID BRADSHAW

March 7, 2023

Seven Hieromartyrs of Cherson

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges permission to reprint Chapters 1–5 and 7, which were originally published as follows:

“The Concept of the Divine Energies,” *Philosophy and Theology* 18 (2006): 93–120.

“The Divine Energies in the New Testament,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 50 (2006): 189–223.

“The Divine Glory and the Divine Energies,” *Faith and Philosophy* 23 (2006): 279–98.

“Essence and Energies: What Kind of Distinction?,” *Analogia* 6 (2019): 5–36.

“The Divine Processions and the Divine Energies,” in *The Dionysian Traditions*, ed. Georgi Kapriev (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 77–92.

“In Defense of the Essence/Energies Distinction: A Reply to Critics,” in *Divine Essence and Divine Energies: Ecumenical Reflections on the Presence of God in Eastern Orthodoxy*, ed. Constantinos Athanasopoulos and Christoph Schneider (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2013), 256–73.

Abbreviations

ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885)
CAG	Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca, ed. A. Busse, 23 vols. (Berlin: Reimer, 1882–1909)
CCSG	Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
CE	<i>Contra Eunomium</i> (Gregory of Nyssa)
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
GCS	Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte
GNO	Gregorii Nysseni Opera, ed. Werner Jaeger (Leiden: Brill, 1952–98)
<i>In Sent.</i>	<i>Commentary on the Sentences</i> (Thomas Aquinas)
KJV	King James Version
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
NPNF	A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894)
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
PG	Patrologia Graeca, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1857–66)

ABBREVIATIONS

PL	Patrologia Latina, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1857–66)
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SC	Sources chrétiennes
<i>SCG</i>	<i>Summa Contra Gentiles</i> (Thomas Aquinas)
<i>ST</i>	<i>Summa Theologiae</i> (Thomas Aquinas)
UBS	United Bible Societies

1. The Concept of the Divine Energies

It has now been more than half a century since Fr. Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, and Fr. John Meyendorff began to draw the attention of the western world to St. Gregory Palamas (1296–1359).¹ Broadly speaking, their claims on his behalf fall under three headings: ecclesiastical, historical, and theological. At the ecclesiastical level, they maintained that Palamas's thought was not merely a piece of late Byzantine arcana of interest only to scholars, but represents the authentic and authoritatively affirmed teaching of the Eastern Orthodox Church. From a historical standpoint, they maintained that Palamas's thought is in full continuity with that of the Greek Fathers, including St. Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, St. Dionysius the Areopagite (although Fr. Meyendorff had reservations at this point), St. Maximus the Confessor, St. John of Damascus, and St. Symeon the New Theologian. Finally, at the theological level they maintained that Palamas's teaching so understood—that is, as the culmination of the Greek patristic tradition—is of essential value today, representing the best and most cogent way of understanding the relationship of God to the world.

These three claims have had widely different fates. The first has won virtually unanimous acceptance; the second has won widespread although far from unanimous acceptance, and remains an object of scholarly debate; and the third has received not even much attention (to say nothing

1. See Georges Florovsky, "St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 5 (1959/60): 119–31; John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974); idem, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974); Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976); idem, *The Vision of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983).

of agreement) beyond the bounds of Orthodoxy.² One rarely finds Palamas mentioned within popular or semi-popular discussions of Christianity, or in scholarly works beyond the narrow confines of academic theology. Within my own two fields, the history of philosophy and the philosophy of religion, Palamas remains virtually unknown. That is not because philosophers are uninterested in the Christian tradition; the same period has seen lavish philosophical analyses of the thought of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham, as well as (less lavishly) Calvin, Schleiermacher, Newman, and others. It is because, for the West, the Christian tradition remains almost exclusively the *western* Christian tradition. Despite its considerable value, the work of Florovsky, Lossky, Meyendorff, and their successors has failed to make much of a dent upon this wide-standing presumption.

What are the reasons for this failure? Without denying the importance of mere inertia, I believe that two intellectual causes have been of primary importance. The advocates of Palamas have failed to place his thought within the history of western philosophy, in the same way that Augustine, Aquinas, and the other luminaries I have mentioned can be placed within it; and they have failed to explain it directly in relation to its biblical sources. Admittedly, these two demands might seem to work at cross purposes, for the first would have us come to Palamas via Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, and the second would have us read him directly in light of Scripture. But it is important to remember that the Bible and Greek philosophy are not two separate and distinct realms of discourse. Since they deal with the same subject—God and the soul, as Augustine put it—and they work in the same language (Greek) with largely the same store of concepts, each sheds light upon the other. This is especially apparent in the case of the concept of the divine energies which is so central to the thought of Palamas. *Energeia* is a term coined by Aristotle and of great importance for Greek philosophy, yet it is also prominent in the Pauline writings, occurring there (as a noun or the corresponding verb, *energein*) twenty-six times. In order to understand the use made of this concept

2. [As regards the first point, one may note the statement of the Holy and Great Council of Crete held in 2016: “The Conciliar work [of the Church] continues uninterrupted in history through the later councils of universal authority, such as, for example, the Great Council (879–880) convened at the time of St. Photios the Great, Patriarch of Constantinople, and also the Great Councils convened at the time of St. Gregory Palamas (1341, 1351, 1368), through which the same truth of faith was confirmed, most especially as concerns the procession of the Holy Spirit and as concerns the participation of human beings in the uncreated divine energies.” *Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church*, sect. 3, <https://www.holycouncil.org/encyclical-holy-council>.]

by the Greek Fathers, and particularly by Palamas, one must take account of both of these overlapping and intertwining sources.

In what follows I will attempt to introduce the concept of the divine energies by presenting it in relation to its philosophical and biblical sources. I shall say relatively little about Palamas himself, for the basic lineaments of the concept of the divine energies came together long before Palamas in the Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century.³ Nonetheless, although Palamas comes on stage only near the end, I hope that this chapter will provide a convenient point of entry for those who seek a greater acquaintance with his work, or merely are curious as to how the Greek patristic tradition fits into the larger history of western thought.

Energeia in ancient philosophy

As I have mentioned, the term *energeia* was coined by Aristotle. His earliest works use it to mean the active exercise of a capacity, such as that for sight or thought, as distinct from the mere possession of the capacity. It is easy to see how from this beginning it came to be used in two otherwise unrelated ways, for activity and for actuality. (Its correlative term *dunamis* likewise has two meanings, capacity and potentiality.) These two senses, which seem to us quite distinct, sometimes reconverge. In *Metaphysics* IX.6 Aristotle distinguishes *energeia* from motion or change (κίνησις) on the grounds that a motion or change is ordered toward some extrinsic end—as housebuilding aims at a house—whereas an *energeia* is its own end. The examples he gives are seeing, thinking, understanding, living well, and flourishing. Plainly these are activities, but they are *activities that are fully actual* in the sense that they contain their own end and thus are fully complete at each moment of their existence, rather than requiring a stretch of time for their completion. Aristotle illustrates this difference with the so-called “tense test,” namely that at each moment that one sees (or thinks, or so on) one also “has seen,” whereas at each moment that one builds a house one has not also built a house.

The most interesting application of *energeia* in this sense is in Aristotle’s theory of the Prime Mover. The Prime Mover is a being whose substance

3. [This is not to deny that it is present to some extent even earlier, particularly in Clement of Alexandria. See Henny Fiskå Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), for a study emphasizing its centrality in Clement.]

(οὐσία) is *energeia* (*Met.* XII.6 1071b20). This is true in three distinct but related senses. First, since the Prime Mover is posited to explain motion, it cannot itself be subject to motion, and thus it is pure actuality in the sense of having no potentiality to change or be acted upon. Second, because its activity of causing motion must be continuous and eternal, it can have no unrealized capacities to act; everything it can do it already does and has done from all eternity, all at once and as a whole. In this sense too it is pure actuality.

For the third sense we must consider more closely what the Prime Mover does. Aristotle realized that the notion of a cause that moves others without itself being moved or changing is quite puzzling. His initial explanation of how this is possible is that the Prime Mover moves others as an “object of thought and desire” (*Met.* XII.7 1072a26). This explanation is far from satisfactory, for it leaves unclear why the Prime Mover must *act* in order to cause motion, as the entire argument has presupposed from the beginning. Accordingly Aristotle fleshes out this idea with his famous theory that the Prime Mover is self-thinking thought, a being whose “thought is a thinking of thinking” (*Met.* XII.9 1075b34). Precisely how this clarifies in what way the Prime Mover is a cause of motion is a controversial question which we need not enter into here.⁴ For our purposes the important point is that it implies that there is a third sense in which the Prime Mover is *energeia*, this time in the sense of activity rather than actuality: namely, the Prime Mover’s substance is nothing other than the self-subsistent activity of thought.

Plainly this does not mean that the Prime Mover thinks of nothing but itself and so has a rather impoverished mind. On the contrary, its thinking somehow embraces all possible intelligible content; after all, if it did not there would be a kind of thinking in which it could engage but does not, and it would in that respect fail to be fully actual. In saying that the Prime Mover “thinks itself,” what Aristotle means is that, precisely because its act of thinking is fully actual, this act is identical to its object, for there is nothing other than the object—no unrealized potency—constituting the act as what it is. Aristotle’s understanding of the Prime Mover is in this respect similar to Hume’s view that the self is a bundle of impressions and ideas. (As regards *human* thought Aristotle would say that our selves are distinct from our actual thought because they include a vast range of unrealized potencies; in the case of the Prime Mover, however, that distinction disappears.) Given

4. David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

the identity of the Prime Mover's thought with its object, a remarkable result follows: the Prime Mover not only *thinks* all possible intelligible content, it *is* all possible intelligible content, existing all at once as a single eternal and fully actual substance. Aristotle does not draw this conclusion explicitly, but later commentators, beginning with Alexander of Aphrodisias, did so, and it became a fundamental ingredient in the synthesis of Plato and Aristotle executed by the Neoplatonists.

My interest here is not in the Prime Mover as such, but in what all this implies about the meaning of *energeia*. In the Prime Mover we have a being which both *thinks* and *is* all possible intelligible content, existing as a single eternal and unchanging whole. The intelligible structure of things, however, is what makes them what they are. (This is the familiar Aristotelian doctrine that form is substance, articulated particularly in *Metaphysics* VII.17.) So one could equally say that the Prime Mover is *present in* all things, imparting—or rather, constituting—their intelligible structure, and thus their being. In light of all this, when we say that the Prime Mover is pure *energeia*, how ought we to translate that term? Activity? Actuality? Plainly the answer is both—and therefore neither. It seems to me that the closest we can come in English is to say that it is pure energy. Specifically, I have in mind the sense of this term given in the *American Heritage Dictionary* as “power exercised with vigor and determination,” and illustrated with the phrase, “devote one's energies to a worthy cause.” But of course no illustration drawn from ordinary objects will be adequate to the notion of a being that is *pure* energy, an energy which constitutes the being of other things.

At the same time, let us note that Aristotle assumes that one can sensibly speak of what it is like to *be* the Prime Mover. For example, he states that its way of life is “such as the best which we enjoy . . . , since its energy (ἐνέργεια) is also pleasure,” and he goes on to add that it “is always in that good state in which we sometimes are” (*Met.* XII.7 1072b14–25). Lest we think of the identification of the Prime Mover with energy as a sort of physicalistic reduction, we must remember that it is a being with mental states in some sense analogous to our own. That there is such an analogy is presupposed in the identification of its activity as thought (νόησις), for thinking is something in which we too engage, although in an incomparably more partial and limited way.

The relevance of all of this for patristic theology becomes clearer when we see how it was adapted and reworked within Neoplatonism. To do so we must take account of a quite different way of thinking about the first principle, one which grew up alongside that of Aristotle and poses a radical

alternative to it. No doubt many criticisms might be made of Aristotle's theology, but one of the most important is that it has no room for a proper sense of the mystery of the divine. After all, if the Prime Mover is the summation of all intelligible content, then what it is can in principle be grasped by the act of thinking (νόησις), however far our own thinking falls short of that ideal. Aristotle's exhortation near the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to become like God by engaging in contemplation is an illustration of how, on his view, human intellectual activity is capable of bringing us into partial isomorphism with the very essence of God.⁵

One has only to turn to Plato to see that a radically different way of thinking about the first principle is possible. As it ultimately took form within Neoplatonism, this alternative is the synthesis of three distinct elements. The first is the famous statement of the *Republic* that the Good is "beyond being" (509b). This statement acquires its full weight only when taken in light of the association, which had been traditional in Greek philosophy at least since Parmenides, between being and intelligibility. If it is true, as Parmenides puts it, that "the same thing exists for thinking and for being" (Frag. 3), then if the Good is beyond being it must be beyond intelligibility as well. The pull toward this conclusion was so strong that the Neoplatonists adopted it without hesitation, quietly ignoring other aspects of the *Republic* which suggest that the Good is an intelligible object.

The second element is the description of the One in the First Hypothesis of the *Parmenides*. In this section of the dialogue, Parmenides gives the strictest possible interpretation to the notion of unity. He concludes that the One has no limits or shape, is neither at rest nor in motion, is neither like nor unlike anything else or even itself, and finally that it does not partake of being, has no name, and is not an object of knowledge, perception, or opinion (*Parm.* 137c–142a). Taken alone this wholly negative description might seem to be no more than a dialectical *reductio* of the Parmenidean interpretation of unity. There was a third element in Plato's thought, however, which led the Neoplatonists to see in it instead a way of gesturing, wholly through negation, towards an ineffable reality. That third element was the description of the One in Plato's unwritten doctrines. Aristotle tells us in the *Metaphysics* that Plato posited a One which, in conjunction with the Indefinite Dyad, is the source of the Forms (*Met.* I.6). He also remarks that some in the Academy identified this One with the Good (*Met.* XIV.4 1091b13–14). It is quite plausible to see Plato himself as among this group, for after all the Good of

5. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7 1177b32–35.

the *Republic* is also the source of the Forms, inasmuch as it is the cause of their being and truth.⁶ Later interpreters, putting these various fragments together, concluded that the One of the unwritten doctrines, the One of the *Parmenides*, and the Good of the *Republic* are one and the same.

Here we have, then, a first principle sharply different from that of Aristotle: unknowable, unnamable, the source of being for other things, while itself “beyond being.” Yet because it is also the Good, all things in some inchoate way seek it. The great achievement of Plotinus lay in harmonizing this Platonic conception of the first principle with that of Aristotle. Plotinus identified the One (or Good) as the ultimate first principle, and Aristotle’s Prime Mover he rechristened as Intellect (νοῦς), the first hypostasis after the One. The One is no-thing, not any particular being because it is the source of all particular being. In the overflow of its goodness it gives rise to Intellect, which is all things inasmuch as it is present in all as their being, intelligibility, life, and other perfections. The object of Intellect’s thought is in a sense the One, but since Intellect cannot apprehend the One in its unity it instead refracts it into a vast array of separate intelligible objects (νοητά), which are the Forms. One important aspect of this Plotinian synthesis is its careful balance between the apophatic and the kataphatic modes of description. The One is primarily (although not solely) describable apophatically, in terms of what it is not; Intellect is primarily (although not solely) describable kataphatically, in terms of what it is.

For our purposes, of course, the most important point is the use that Plotinus made of the concept of *energeia*. I argued earlier that the Prime Mover is pure energy, an energy which constitutes the being of other things. It is natural to ask whether this conception is truly coherent; that is, whether an energy which is not the energy *of* something, some active agent which is not itself simply identical with the energy, actually makes sense. Plotinus answers this question with what is known as the “theory of two acts.” Intellect comes forth from the One precisely as its external act or energy, what Plotinus refers to as its *energeia ek tēs ousias*, the energy which comes forth from the substance. So far, then, the answer is that Intellect as an energy is dependent upon the One. However, Plotinus was too deeply steeped in Aristotle to think that substance is not itself a kind of *energeia* (a point emphasized in *Met.* VIII.2). Hence he also posits an *energeia tēs ousias*, an internal

6. There are also sketchy reports of a public lecture on the Good in which Plato allegedly made this identification; Konrad Gaiser, “Plato’s Enigmatic Lecture ‘On the Good,’” *Phronesis* 25 (1980): 5–37.

act or energy constituting the substance, of which the external act is a kind of image. His favorite illustration of this is fire, which has an internal heat that constitutes its substance and an external heat that it gives forth into the world, but the distinction is meant to be perfectly general.

Ultimately it turns out that the internal act of all things other than the One is some form of contemplation, for all things other than the One are what they are by contemplating their prior in the chain of emanation. Whether the One itself has an internal act is a point on which Plotinus wavered. I believe he ultimately concluded that the answer is yes, and identified this act with a fully direct and unmediated self-awareness.⁷ This is a point that had little influence within the Greek patristic tradition, however, unless there is an echo of it in Gregory of Nyssa's statement that "the life of the Supreme Being is love."⁸

Energeia in the New Testament

Such, in barest outline, is the Greek philosophical tradition pertaining to *energeia*. Now let us turn to St. Paul. In interpreting the Pauline uses of *energeia* it is important to be aware of the subtle developments in the term's meaning during the Hellenistic era. As an aid to clarity let us first note the range of meaning of the English term "energy." Here is the entry for "energy" in the *American Heritage Dictionary*:

1. a. Vigor or power in action. b. Vitality and intensity of expression. 2. The capacity for action or accomplishment: *lacked energy to finish the job*.
3. (Usually plural) Power exercised with vigor and determination: *devotes one's energies to a worthy cause*.
4. (Physics) The work that a physical system is capable of doing in changing from its actual state to a specified reference state.

We can set aside sense 4 as irrelevant to the ancient period. In order to show that *energeia* means energy in an ancient author, one must show that its sense corresponds to one of senses 1–3. I have already suggested that within Aristotle's discussion of the Prime Mover it occurs roughly in sense 3. However,

7. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 85–91.

8. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection* (trans. NPNF 2/5: 450); cf. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 170–71.

this usage by Aristotle had little impact during the Hellenistic period, when Aristotle's technical treatises, including the *Metaphysics*, were apparently not in circulation.⁹ Most frequently in Hellenistic authors *energeia* means either "activity" or "characteristic activity, operation." There are also occasional passages in Polybius and Diodorus Siculus where its meaning corresponds to that of "energy" in sense 1, a development apparently spurred by some ambiguous passages in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.¹⁰

When one turns to St. Paul against this Hellenistic background, the first point which leaps to attention is that Paul reserves *energeia* and *energein* (the active form of the corresponding verb) for the action of spiritual agents—God, Satan, or demons.¹¹ This was quite unprecedented. Earlier sources had used both terms freely in a variety of ways, including for the action of material objects, human beings, and the natural elements, as well as of spiritual beings. This is true even of two sources which in other respects often provide important precedents for Pauline usage, the Septuagint and Philo of Alexandria.¹²

Paul's restriction of *energeia* and *energein* to supernatural action was so striking that it apparently established a precedent for subsequent Christian literature. The twelve occurrences of the two terms in the Apostolic Fathers all refer to the action of God, Christ, angels, or demons. For example, in the *Shepherd of Hermas* purity, holiness, and contentment are *energeiai* of the angel of righteousness which accompanies every man, and anger, bitterness, gluttony, lust, and pride are *energeiai* of the angel of wickedness.¹³ The Epistle of Barnabas refers to Satan simply as *ho energōn*, "the active one," and 1 Clement speaks of how God makes manifest the everlasting structures of the world by the deed he performs (τῶν ἐνεργουμένων).¹⁴ The same pattern holds in the Greek Apologists. In Justin Martyr *energein* is virtually a technical term for the activity of demons, being used thus in nineteen of its

9. They reentered circulation in the edition of Andronicus of Rhodes in the mid-first century BC, but even for some time afterward they seem to have been little known (as is still true, for example, in Clement of Alexandria).

10. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 51–55.

11. See 1 Cor 12:6, 10–11; Gal 2:8; Eph 1:11, 19–20; 2:2; 3:7; 4:16; Phil 2:12–13; 3:21; Col 1:29; 2:12; 2 Thess 2:9, 11. I shall assume for the sake of simplicity that Paul was in fact the author of all the Pauline writings. Those who doubt this may, if they wish, substitute for my references to Paul a circumlocution such as "Paul and his imitators."

12. See Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 51–60, and below, p. 35.

13. *Shepherd of Hermas*, Mandate 6.1–2.

14. *Epistle of Barnabas* 2.1, 1 Clement 60.1.

twenty occurrences. Justin likewise uses *energeia* exclusively of supernatural agents—four times of demons, once of God, and once of Christ. Athenagoras (in the *Legatio*) and Theophilus together use the two words twenty-two times, all of them in reference to God, demons, or idols, which they regard as demons under another name.¹⁵

This association between *energeia/energein* and supernatural agency was not without an effect upon the meaning of the two terms. The *energeia* of a supernatural agent, when it is present in a human being, is most readily understood as a power or capacity for certain kinds of action. We accordingly find *energeia* shifting toward the meaning of “a capacity for action or accomplishment” (“energy” in sense 2), and *energein* shifting toward that of “to be active in a way that imparts an energy.” To what extent these shifts have taken place within a given passage is often hard to pin down, but on the whole it seems to me that they are already apparent in the Greek Apologists. Thus Justin says that Moses “by the inspiration and energy (ἐνέργειαν) of God took brass and made it into the figure of a cross,” and that Simon Magus was able to perform acts of magic “by the skill of the energizing demons” (διὰ τῆς τῶν ἐνεργούντων δαιμόνων τέχνης).¹⁶ Theophilus reports that demons expelled by exorcism boast that they had once actively imparted energy in Homer, Hesiod, and the other pagan poets (εἰς ἐκείνους ἐνεργήσαντες).¹⁷ Athenagoras similarly holds that the prophets uttered what was energized within them by the Holy Spirit (ἃ ἐνηργοῦντο ἐξεφώνησαν).¹⁸ Admittedly, in most such cases taking *energeia* as activity or operation, and *energein* as to be active or to operate, yields an acceptable (although less vivid) sense. But by the third century there clearly are passages where energy in sense 2 is the only possible meaning. For example, in the *Apostolic Constitutions* the author, speaking as one of the Apostles, states that on Pentecost “the Lord Jesus sent us the gift of the Holy Spirit, and we were filled with his energy (ἐπλήσθημεν αὐτοῦ τῆς ἐνεργείας) and spoke with new tongues.”¹⁹ To render this statement as “we were filled with his activity (or operation)” would fail to convey its clear import, which is that the Holy Spirit was actively present in the apostles imparting a new capacity for action.

15. See below, pp. 35–36. I have included in these statistics the passive occurrences of *energein*.

16. Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 26, 60.

17. Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolycum* II.8.

18. Athenagoras, *Legatio* 9.

19. *Apostolic Constitutions* V.20.49. This work is based on materials of c. 200–220, although compiled later.

To what extent does St. Paul's own usage fit this pattern? This question does not admit of a simple answer, for Paul's usage is subtle and varied. One reason why most scholars have been reluctant to see in it anything more than the traditional meanings of the two terms is that (unlike the Apostolic Fathers and Greek Apologists) he apparently does not reserve the middle/passive form of *energein*, *energeisthai*, for spiritual agents. Taking this verb as middle, as it is standardly rendered, the subjects of whom it is used include "the motions of sin," comfort, death, faith, power, the divine *energeia*, the word of God, and the "mystery of iniquity."²⁰ It is certainly strange that Paul would use the noun and the active form of the verb with programmatic consistency, while using the middle form in such an apparently random fashion.

In fact it can be shown that *energeisthai* in antiquity is never middle, but only passive, and furthermore that Paul's use of the term was uniformly taken as passive by the Church Fathers. So understood the meaning of *energeisthai* falls into place as correlative to *energein*, meaning either (depending on the context) "to be acted upon" or "to be made effective, to be energized." That *energeisthai* is passive was already recognized around the turn of the last century by two eminent New Testament scholars, Joseph B. Mayor and J. Armitage Robinson.²¹ Unfortunately their work was ignored by most subsequent translators and lexicographers, as it is, for example, in the article on *energein* in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. The major cause of this oversight would seem to be the legacy of the Reformation. One of the major texts bearing on the question of *sola fide* is Galatians 5:6, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith *di' agapēs energoumenē*." If one takes *energoumenē* here as middle then the meaning is (as translated by the KJV) "faith which worketh by love." If one takes it as passive then the meaning is either "faith made effective by love," or, more pointedly, "faith energized by love." Obviously an adherent of *sola fide* must insist upon the first of these readings, and that is what Luther does in his commentary on Galatians.²² By an irony of history, Catholic

20. See Rom 7:5; 2 Cor 1:6; 4:12; Gal 5:6; Eph 3:20; Col 1:29; 1 Thess 2:13; and 2 Thess 2:7, respectively. Biblical quotations are from the King James Version except where noted.

21. Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Comments* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1892), 177–79; and J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians: A Revised Text and Translation with Exposition and Notes* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1903), 244–47. Both works have been frequently reprinted.

22. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, vol. 27 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 28. For more recent examples of this view

polemicists also had to accept this reading, for the phrase is translated in the Vulgate as *fidem quae per caritatem operatur*, and the Vulgate was confirmed as the official Roman Catholic translation by the Council of Trent. (Indeed, the Vulgate consistently renders both *energein* and *energeisthai* as *operatur*, hopelessly muddling any attempt to distinguish between them.²³) The upshot was that both sides had an important stake in maintaining the traditional view.

I will not repeat here the evidence that *energeisthai* is passive, merely remarking that it seems to me about as solid as such a case could be.²⁴ Once the true meaning of this word is recognized Paul's usage in the anomalous verses turns out to fit the predominant pattern, for the unexpressed agent in virtually every case is God or Satan. A later chapter reviews all the relevant passages in detail.²⁵ Here I will mention just a few that seem especially significant. One is Colossians 1:29, where Paul refers to himself as "striving according to Christ's working (or energy, ἐνέργεια), which is being made effective (or energized, ἐνεργουμένην) in me" (Col 1:29, my trans.). This verse brings out well the synergistic tendency of Paul's thought. On the one hand the divine energy is at work within Paul, transforming him, so that from this standpoint he is the object of God's activity; on the other it finds expression in Paul's own activity, so that Paul's free agency and that of God coincide. Indeed, not only do the actions Paul alludes to in this passage exhibit full engagement and self-control, they do so more than did his actions prior to his conversion. As the story is told in Acts, Saul was trapped in self-deception until God set him free on the road to Damascus. Now the divine energy which works in him is also his own, more truly than anything he did was his own before he ceased to "kick against the pricks" (Acts 9:5).

Other passages also bring out what I believe we may call, without exaggeration, Paul's synergistic ontology. One of particular clarity is Philippians

see Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:654; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 232; Ronald Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 228–30.

23. Adding to the confusion, it also renders *ergazetai* and *katergazetai* by *operatur*, so that there could be no hope, for anyone reading the Vulgate alone, of recognizing *energeia/energein/energeisthai* as a distinct word group. It is worth noting that the Pauline epistles were never translated by St. Jerome, so that the version in the Vulgate is essentially the Old Latin text. One wonders how Jerome might have redressed this situation.

24. See below, 145–50.

25. See chapter 2 in this volume; also idem, *Aristotle East and West*, 121–22, from which I borrow in this and the next few paragraphs.

2:12–13: “Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out (κατεργάζεσθε) your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you (ὁ ἐνεργῶν ἐν ὑμῖν) both to will and to do (ἐνεργεῖν) of his good pleasure.” Here the exhortation to act is coupled with a reminder that it is God who is acting. Neither negates the other; the Philippians are both free agents responsible for their own salvation, and the arena in which God works to bring about that salvation. Bearing this duality in mind, one could legitimately translate, “it is God who *imparts energy* in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure,” where “to do” refers *both* to the Philippians’ action *and* to God’s action as it is expressed in them. This rendering helps bring out why for Paul there is no contradiction in urging the Philippians to do something that he also sees as the work of God. The peculiar nature of God’s activity is that it imparts the energy to do his will, although this energy must be freely expressed or “worked out” to be effective.

Finally let us note a passage which was of the utmost importance for the Greek Fathers, the description of the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12.

Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost. Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are diversities of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operation (ἐνεργημάτων), but it is the same God which worketh (ὁ ἐνεργῶν) all in all. . . . For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues; but all these worketh (ἐνεργεῖ) that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. (12:3–11)

This passage begins by asserting that even such an ordinary and voluntary action as calling Jesus “Lord” requires the cooperation of the Spirit. It goes on to list a variety of spiritual gifts, each one an *energēma* (something performed) of the Spirit. They include not only extraordinary gifts like the working of miracles, but also more ordinary qualities such as faith and the “word of wisdom.” Again there is no dividing line between the natural and the divine. Any believer is called to a life of continual cooperation with the

Spirit, a cooperation which can manifest itself in any number of ways both exceptional and mundane.

To speak of synergy could be misleading if it suggested a picture of two equal agents who simply choose to work together. Plainly, since in these cases one is the Creator and the other a creature, the action of the latter depends for its reality upon the active support of the former. I take it that Paul interprets this notion in light of the common experience (which he had vividly shared) of feeling that one's actions were not truly one's own while one was mired in sin and self-deception. On his view, synergy, the cooperation of God and man, is neither a symmetrical relation nor one in which the divine overpowers and replaces the human. It is rather one in which the human *becomes fully human* by embracing the divine. To obey the divine commandments is, on this view, to fully realize one's own identity by affirming and cooperating with God's creative intent. This is not a radically new idea; indeed, it is a prominent theme in the Old Testament.²⁶ What is new is the use of the vocabulary of *energeia* to express it.

The essence-energies distinction

We are now in a position to see what use the Greek Fathers made of these ideas. For brevity I will focus on the Eunomian controversy of the mid-fourth century. Eunomius was a philosophically sophisticated Arian (or, more precisely, neo-Arian) who had a simple argument that the Son is not God. It was that God is ingenerate or unbegotten, and furthermore this is not merely a privative attribute or human conception, but the divine essence (οὐσία) itself. Plainly such an *ousia* cannot be shared with another by begetting; hence the Son, who is begotten of the Father, cannot be of one essence (ὁμοούσιον) with the Father. As for terms such as "life," "light," and "power," which in the New Testament are used of both the Father and the Son, Eunomius argued that they must be taken differently in the two cases. Since the divine essence is utterly simple, "every word used to signify the essence of the Father is equivalent in force of meaning to 'the unbegotten' (τὸ ἀγέννητον)."²⁷ Said of the Father such words signify the divine essence; said of the Son they signify a creature.

26. For example, in Psalm 1, and in the psalms of repentance such as Psalm 51.

27. Eunomius, *Apology* 19; trans. Richard Paul Vaggione, *Eunomius: The Extant Works* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 59.

The task of replying to Eunomius fell to St. Basil of Caesarea. Basil objected both to the assumption that the divine *ousia* can be known and to the assumption that, because of divine simplicity, all non-privative terms said of God are identical in meaning. He writes:

We say that we know the greatness of God, His power, His wisdom, His goodness, His providence over us, and the justness of His judgment, but not His very essence (οὐσία). . . . But God, he [Eunomius] says, is simple, and whatever attribute of Him you have reckoned as knowable is of His essence. The absurdities involved in this sophism are innumerable. When all these high attributes have been enumerated, are they all names of one essence? And is there the same mutual force in His awfulness and His loving-kindness, His justice and His creative power, His foreknowledge and His requital, His majesty and His providence? In mentioning any of these, do we declare His essence?

The question, then, is how to characterize the distinction between that in God which cannot be known (the divine *ousia*) and that which can be known, such as the divine power, wisdom, and goodness. Basil's answer emerges in the continuation of the passage:

The energies are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His energies, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His energies come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach.²⁸

As I understand him, Basil is here applying to the Christian God the distinction between *ousia* and *energeia* found in the philosophical tradition, and particularly in Plotinus.

His doing so raises at least two distinct questions. One is that of the ontological relationship between the essence and the energies. In Plotinus the external act of the One comes forth as the distinct hypostasis of Intellect. Is something similar true here in Basil? The other question is that of divine freedom, or, more precisely, the capacity to do otherwise. In Plotinus the One could not do otherwise than produce Intellect. Of course Plotinus sees this fact as not an impairment but an expression of the One's freedom, since noth-

28. Basil, Epistle 234.1 (trans. NPNF 2/8: 274, modified). See also the similar passage in Basil, *Against Eunomius* I.8.

ing other than the One's own nature determines it to act as it does. By contrast, in the Christian tradition God is thought of as sufficiently like a person that in at least some cases, such as the creation of the world, he could do otherwise. Should we say, then, that his energies could be different than they are?

As regards the first question, plainly for Basil the energies are not a separate hypostasis or series of hypostases; rather, they are acts which God performs. Many scholars would in fact prefer to translate *energeia* in the passage which I have quoted as "operation," and to take Basil as saying only that God's *operations* come down to us. I believe that the entire history of the distinction between the divine *ousia* and *energeia*, both in pagan and Christian thought, argues against such a view. I find support at this point in an interesting semantic argument presented by Basil's brother, St. Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory adopts the view, which was widespread in antiquity, that a name is in some way indicative of the form or intrinsic characteristics of the thing named. Since God has no form, he has no name in the proper sense. Instead terms such as "god" (θεός) name the divine *energeia* of oversight or governance.²⁹ (Gregory derives *theos* from *theaomai*, behold.) Now it is plain that by *energeia* here Gregory has in mind an operation. However, it cannot be *only* an operation, for then in speaking of God we would be speaking of an operation of God—that is, an operation of an operation, and so on in an infinite regress. Somehow by *energeia* Gregory and Basil would appear to understand *both* that which God is, and that which God performs.

I believe that this is perfectly intelligible in light of the history that we have traced. From the time of its introduction by Aristotle, *energeia* always indicated the energy which God both *is* and *does*. Plotinus refined this picture by distinguishing between internal and external act, but he did not overthrow it. Basil and Gregory in their turn revise Plotinus by rejecting the distinction of hypostasis between Intellect and the One. For them the relevant distinction is rather that between God *as he exists within himself and is known only to himself*, and God *as he manifests himself to others*. The former is the divine *ousia*, the latter the divine energies. It is important to note that both are God, but differently conceived: God as unknowable and as knowable, as wholly beyond us and as within our reach.

In putting the distinction this way, however, we must not suppose that the essence and energies are separated by a fixed and permanent boundary. The Cappadocians think instead of that which is unknowable in God as a

29. See Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 161–64, and James Le Grys, "Names for the Ineffable God: St. Gregory of Nyssa's Explanation," *The Thomist* 62 (1998): 333–54.

kind of receding horizon.³⁰ Precisely the fact that we cannot know God as he knows himself draws us forward to seek to know him ever more deeply. St. Gregory Nazianzen expresses vividly this sense of a longing that is always both being satisfied and seeking satisfaction:

In Himself [God] sums up and contains all being, having neither beginning in the past nor end in the future; like some great sea of being, limitless and unbounded, transcending all conception of time and nature, only adumbrated by the mind, and that very dimly and scantily—not from the things directly concerning Him, but from the things around Him; one image (φαντασίας) being got from one source and another from another, and combined into some sort of presentation of the truth, which escapes us when we have caught it, and takes to flight when we have conceived it, blazing forth upon our master-part, even when that is cleansed, as the lightning flash which will not stay its course does upon our sight—in order as I conceive by that part of it which we can comprehend to draw us to itself . . . and by that part of it which we cannot comprehend to move our wonder, and as an object of wonder to become more an object of desire, and being desired to purify, and by purifying to make us like God.³¹

The “things around God” are, I take it, another name for the divine energies.³² Two points in this passage are especially worth noting. One is the necessity for the play of images, “one image being got from one source and another from another,” in order to form anything like an adequate conception of God. Here we find the underlying philosophical rationale for the immense variety of liturgical poetry and iconographic expression within the eastern Christian tradition. The other point is the sequence leading from wonder, to desire, to purification, and finally to *homoiosis theōi*, likeness to God. A philosophical reader cannot help but notice the echoes in this of Plato and Aristotle: for instance, of the famous statement of Aristotle that philosophy begins with a sense of wonder, and of the Platonic emphasis on the need for purification of the soul, and of the theme found in both authors that the human *telos* is achieving a likeness to God.

30. [See further chapter 3 below, particularly the discussion of Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Moses*.]

31. Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 38.7 (trans. NPNF 2/7: 346–47).

32. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 166–67.

Nonetheless, the fundamental distinction between God as he is known to himself and as he is known to us was derived by the Cappadocians not from philosophical sources, but from the Bible. Most obviously, it was inspired by the encounter of Moses with God on Mount Sinai in Exodus 33. There God warns Moses that “thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.” Nonetheless he continues: “it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen” (33:22–23). Gregory Nazianzen takes this passage as a model for understanding his own experience. In doing so he draws a distinction much like that we have seen in Basil between God as he is known to himself and as he “reaches to us”:

What is this that has happened to me, O friends and initiates and fellow lovers of the truth? I was running up to lay hold on God, and thus I went up into the mount, and drew aside the curtain of the cloud, and entered away from matter and material things, and as far as I could I withdrew within myself. And then when I looked up I scarce saw the back parts of God, although I was sheltered by the rock, the Word that was made flesh for us. And when I looked a little closer I saw, not the first and unmingled nature, known to itself—to the Trinity, I mean; not that which abides within the first veil and is hidden by the Cherubim, but only that nature which at last even reaches to us. And that is, so far as I can tell, the majesty, or as holy David calls it, the glory which is manifested among the creatures, which it has produced and governs. For these [i.e., the majesty and glory] are the back parts of God, which He leaves behind Him as tokens of Himself like the shadows and reflections of the sun in the water, which show the sun to our weak eyes because we cannot look at the sun itself.³³

More broadly, the Cappadocians took all the biblical theophanies—including, most famously, the burning bush of Exodus 3—as pointing to a similar distinction. In such events God is known *precisely as unknowable*; it is the very extremity of his condescension in appearing and making himself known which underscores the deep chasm between his mode of being and our own.³⁴

In light of this biblical background, the notion of *theōsis* or deification

33. Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 28.3 (trans. NPNF 2/7: 289).

34. See further chapter 3 in this volume.

may seem like a foreign importation. It is at this point that the Pauline usage of the concept of *energeia* becomes crucially important. As I mentioned earlier, an especially important passage was 1 Corinthians 12. Basil in *On the Holy Spirit* builds upon this passage to develop an understanding of the gifts of the Spirit as a form of divine energy. He writes:

As is the power of seeing in the healthy eye, so is the energy (ἐνέργεια) of the Spirit in the purified soul. . . . And as the skill in him who has acquired it, so is the grace of the Spirit ever present in the recipient, though not continuously active (ἐνεργοῦσα). For as the skill is potentially in the artisan, but only in operation when he is working in accordance with it, so also the Spirit is present with those who are worthy, but works (ἐνεργεῖ) as need requires, in prophecies, or in healings, or in some other carrying into effect (ἐνεργήμασιν) of His powers.³⁵

This passage is almost Aristotelian in its distinction between an enduring state of the soul (in Aristotelian terms, first actuality) and its active expression (second actuality). But for Basil these are two different forms of energy, the one latent and the other active. Basil understands participation in the divine energy as an ongoing state of the soul that finds expression, as need be, in particular acts. This is what is meant by deification in the Greek patristic tradition: an ongoing and progressively growing participation in the divine energies.³⁶

It is worth noting how this understanding of participation in the divine avoids a certain cul-de-sac present in pagan Neoplatonism. For Plotinus we do not so much *participate* in Intellect—much less the One—as rediscover our true identity *as* Intellect. We are each in our truest core an unfallen intellect (νοῦς) which shares in the unity-in-multiplicity of Intellect, much as the light of each lamp in a room shares in the room's light, or each theorem of a science shares in the integral meaning of the whole. In rediscovering our true identity as *nous*, we leave behind the accidents of memory and personality which individuate us here below in order to merge into the pristine clarity of perfect noetic activity. Later Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus and Proclus were dissatisfied by this starkly impersonal conception of the human

35. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* XXVI.61 (trans. NPNF 2/8: 38).

36. See further Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 172–78, 193–201, and Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

end and attempted in various ways to mitigate it. For the Cappadocians, however, such a problem does not even arise. The distinction of essence and energy enables them to understand human-divine communion as taking place within the sphere of joint personal activity. In coming to be deified we share progressively in God's activity, but without losing our distinct identity. Indeed, much like St. Paul, they believe that we only fully achieve our own identity when we make our activity that of God. Such synergy is, in their view, a way of knowing God that is neither inferential, nor noetic in the Aristotelian sense, nor a matter simply of feeling or intuition. It is the knowledge that comes through sharing actively in the work of another, thereby coming to know the other as the author of that work.

From all of this it is clear how the second of our two questions, that of whether the divine energies could be different than they are, is to be answered. If they are the sphere of personal action in the way that I have described, then at least some of them could be different; otherwise they would be a kind of emanation rather than the free acts of a free Creator. However, the same constraint means that there are limits to the ways that they could be different. The range of acts which would constitute a legitimate expression of my character is quite large, yet I trust that at least some acts, such as murder, adultery, or treason, fall beyond it. In the same way, if the divine energies are to manifest the divine *ousia*, then although they can vary enormously they must fall within the range that is properly related to the divine *ousia* (whatever it might be!) as expression to source. For example, God need not have created, and given that he did create he might have created the world differently than he did; furthermore, even given that he created this world he might act within it differently, for example, by distributing different spiritual gifts. Thus many of the divine energies, including those of creation, providence, and foreknowledge, as well as the gifts of the Spirit, could be different or could not exist at all. On the other hand, if he acts at all his action cannot fail to be good. Hence if there are any energies at all, goodness is among them. The same would seem to be true of wisdom, being, power, life, love, holiness, beauty, virtue, immortality, eternity, infinity, and simplicity, all of which the Cappadocians, or other Church Fathers after them, list among the divine energies.

To know whether these energies are necessary, then, we must ask whether it is possible that God not act at all—that is, whether he could be wholly without energy (ἀνενέργητος). So far as I know this question was not raised in such terms. However, a question very close to it—that of whether there would be divine energies even apart from creation—was at the center

of the celebrated hesychast controversy in the fourteenth century which provoked the work of Gregory Palamas. Certain monks known as hesychasts claimed to have been granted a vision of what they called the uncreated light. Whether it is possible that there be such a light, and if so what is its nature, became the focus of intense debate. Ultimately it was decided that there is an uncreated light and that it is simply the visible form of the divine energy.³⁷

This means that the divine energy is present in some form with the Godhead from all eternity, quite independently of the act of creation. And that in turn implies that the divine energy is not (as one might otherwise be tempted to suppose) simply the way in which God manifests himself to creatures. It is that, to be sure, but even without creatures there would still be an eternal self-manifestation within the Godhead. Within a Christian context it is natural to understand this as the mutual love and self-revelation of the persons of the Trinity. There are hints of such a view among the earlier Greek Fathers, beginning with Gregory of Nyssa, but unfortunately the debate over the divine energies in the fourteenth century failed to make these connections explicit.³⁸ Once they are made it becomes clear how there can be *uncreated* divine energies which are not “emanations,” as was charged by Palamas’s critics.

Some comparisons

What relevance do these ideas have today? It seems to me that the Greek patristic distinction of essence and energies in God has a number of advantages over traditional western theology. In the first place, it succeeds in incorporating the apophatic approach to God in a way that western theology does not. The divine *ousia* is beyond any act of naming or conceptual thought, known only by actively sharing in its energetic expression. Such a view is in keeping with both the biblical theophanies and the New Testament concept of synergy. It is also philosophically well grounded, for as Plotinus saw, if God is the source of form he must himself possess no form. Yet if he is the source of form he must *also* be present in things as their form, the intelligible structure which makes them what they are. These are the two classical

37. See Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*; Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 229–42. [See more recently Norman Russell, *Gregory Palamas and the Making of Palamism in the Modern Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Tikhon Pino, *Essence and Energies: Being and Naming God in St. Gregory Palamas* (New York: Routledge, 2023).]

38. See Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 214–20, 242, 273–74.

first principles: Plato's Good and Aristotle's Prime Mover. Whereas Plotinus keeps them separate as distinct hypostases, the Greek Fathers consider them two ways of understanding the one God.

I have found that it is often at this point that those trained within the western theological tradition feel most uneasy. If we have no concept or "name" for the divine *ousia*, then how can we speak meaningfully of God? On what grounds can the Church articulate doctrine and reject heresy? And—perhaps the most acute worry—what can we actually feel confident that we know about God? Could God's *ousia* be so radically different from his manifestation in the divine energies that we might be deceived even in so basic an affirmation as that God is good?

Such worries derive, I believe, from inadequate attention to the relationship between the essence and the energies. The divine energies are not any acts whatsoever, but *acts which manifest the divine character*; accordingly there can be no question of God somehow hiding behind a façade of false energies, seeming to be good or benevolent when he is not. In saying that God is "beyond" the perfections that he bestows on creatures, what is meant is not that he fails to possess those perfections, but that he possesses them in a way that is fundamentally and permanently beyond our capacities to apprehend. As an analogy we might consider the capacities of Flatlanders (in E. A. Abbott's charming fable, *Flatland*) to apprehend the qualities of three-dimensional objects. When a sphere passes through their world, they apprehend it first as a point, then as a growing circle, then as a shrinking circle, and finally again as a point. They correctly apprehend that it is round, but at the same time they recognize that the way in which it is round far surpasses anything that they can comprehend. What better way could there be for them to recognize this duality than to say that the sphere is both round and beyond roundness? Each affirmation is true, but each needs the other in order to prevent its own truth from being deeply misleading.

The Greek Fathers have a similar wary appreciation of both the necessity for language and its capacity to mislead. As Gregory Nazianzen remarks, our thinking and speech about God consists of "one image got from one source and another from another, and combined into some sort of presentation of the truth, which escapes us when we have caught it, and takes to flight when we have conceived it." The term preferred by the Cappadocians for the conceptions we form of God is *epinoia*. An *epinoia* is a conception formed by reflection upon experience, making use of mental operations such as analogy, association, comparison, extrapolation, negation, and analysis. To use the examples given by Basil, a single body can be analyzed in *epinoia* into

color, shape, solidity, size, and so forth, and wheat can be identified under different *epinoiai* as fruit, seed, and nourishment.³⁹ There is nothing wrong with forming various *epinoiai* of God, and indeed we must do so if we are to speak meaningfully about him. Yet we must not forget that such *epinoiai* are partly shaped by our own mental operations.

The formation of *epinoiai* is to be contrasted with *noēsis*, the kind of thinking which apprehends the ontological structure of the object known. Indeed, according to Aristotle *noēsis* is fully isomorphic with the object known, consisting in the very form of the object coming to be present in the mind. For the Greek Fathers (as for the Neoplatonists), since God has no form he is not an object of *noēsis*. They see the fact that we are limited to *epinoiai* in thinking of him as a cause not of despair, but of wonder; it is part of what draws us always forward to seek to know him more. Dogmatic affirmations have a necessary place as guidance in this quest, but they should never be mistaken for the attainment of the actual *experience* of God, which is beyond both human conceptions (ἐπινοίαι) and *noēsis*.

Thus the Greek Fathers appropriated from Plotinus both the apophatic and the kataphatic modes of discourse, seeing both as equally necessary for the articulation of Christian belief. One might expect that Augustine, with his knowledge of Plotinus, would have followed a similar path. But in fact he did not. Augustine characteristically thinks of God as Truth, the Truth that is present to our minds enabling us to know. In line with the classical identification of thinking and being, he also describes God as *ipsum esse*, being itself. These two descriptions together yield what is in essence the Plotinian understanding of Intellect. Augustine has no use for the other side of Plotinus, the understanding of God as beyond being and beyond intellect. Granted, he acknowledges that in this life we cannot know the divine essence, but that is a limitation of our present bodily existence. Moses and St. Paul are for Augustine paradigms of persons who for a brief time were taken out of their bodies into a state of rapture, enjoying a direct vision of the divine essence. The blessed in heaven, being finally removed from this life, will enjoy such a vision for all eternity. Aquinas adopts this idea and integrates it within his own Aristotelian framework. He argues that as pure act God must be *intrinsically* intelligible, however much our present limitations

39. *Against Eunomius* I.6; for a helpful study of the Hellenistic background to this concept, cf. Christopher Stead, "Logic and the Application of Names to God," in *El "Contra Eunomium I" en la Produccion Literaria de Gregorio de Nisa*, ed. Lucas F. Mateo-Seco and Juan L. Bastero (Ediciones Universidad de Navarra: Pamplona, 1988), 303–20. [See also chapter 4.]

prevent us from understanding him. Drawing on Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as Augustine, he identifies the *telos* of human existence as the intellectual apprehension of the divine essence.⁴⁰

These differences regarding apophaticism point to a second major area of difference, the roles that the two traditions assign to personal activity. I have pointed out how the Greek Fathers drew on the Pauline concept of synergy to see the human *telos* as an ever-deepening participation in the divine energies. Such participation begins in this present life and engages the body as much as the soul. On this view, our present acts of obedience to God, seeking him in prayer, and sharing in his life through worship and the sacraments are the sort of thing that is ultimately constitutive of our final beatitude. Our final state will be purer and richer, of course, but it will be recognizably in continuity with these present ways of knowing God. It is doubtful that the same can be said on the Augustinian-Thomistic view. According to Aquinas, in the afterlife God will infuse the blessed with the *lumen gloriae*, the “light of glory” which will enable them to apprehend the divine essence. All of our present acts are designed to bring us to that point. The body has no real role in the beatific vision, and indeed Aquinas states explicitly that the resurrection of the body is not necessary for beatitude and does nothing to increase its intensity.⁴¹ So far as I can see, the same is true of our memory and other personal characteristics. In the long discussion of the beatific vision in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, the only concession made to personal differences is that the degree to which a person apprehends the divine essence will depend on that person’s virtue in this life (III.58). This in no way detracts from the basic point that the beatific vision is strictly an act of intellect. As such it is no more a personal act than is the Aristotelian *theōria* upon which it is modeled.

Finally I will touch briefly on a third area of difference, one that is large and deserves more careful exploration than I can give it here. Much of traditional natural theology is built around the concept of divine simplicity. Augustine and Aquinas have different ways of reaching this point, but they agree that all non-relational and non-privative predicates said of God are different ways of signifying the divine essence. Part of what this implies is that

40. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 222–29, 254–57. [It is true, as Anna Williams observes, that the degree of apprehension is determined by a person’s degree of charity, and thus that the will plays an essential role; nonetheless, the apprehension itself remains an intellectual act. See Anna Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 38–39.]

41. See *Summa Theologiae* (= *ST*) I-II, Q. 4, art. 5.

God's will is identical to his essence.⁴² Of the many difficulties to which such a view gives rise, I will mention two. The first pertains to divine freedom. If God is free in the way traditionally assumed in Christianity, he could will differently than he does. Does this mean that in such a case his essence would be different? And if so, how different could it be? Assuming that there is at least some aspect of the essence that could never be different—say, divine goodness—then there must be a distinction within the essence between that which could be different and that which could not. Surely, however, if anything is contrary to divine simplicity, it is the presence of such a distinction within the divine essence! Augustine and Aquinas dealt with this problem in different ways. Augustine's considered view seems to have been that God could not in fact do differently than he does, at least as regards his creation of this world and all that is in it.⁴³ Despite Augustine's massive authority, this view was condemned (without recognizing its Augustinian credentials) at the Council of Sens in 1140. Aquinas accordingly affirms that God has *liberum arbitrium* and could do otherwise than he does. Yet how he reconciles this assertion with divine simplicity remains deeply obscure.⁴⁴

The second difficulty pertains to reciprocity between God and creatures. If the divine will is identical to the divine essence, it would seem that the divine will cannot in any way be a response to creatures' own initiative, for in that case creatures would contribute to determining the divine essence. Aquinas recognizes this problem, if it is one, and bites the bullet: his position is that God's will is not in any way a response to creatures but is determined solely by God. It is hard to see how most traditional religious practice, including petitionary prayer, sacrifice, and even simply the desire to please God, can make sense on such a view. Indeed, as Aquinas recognizes, on this

42. Augustine, *Confessions* XI.10.12, XII.15.18; Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (= *SCG*) I.73, *ST* I, Q. 3, art. 3–4 and Q. 19, art. 1.

43. See Roland Teske, "The Motive for Creation according to Saint Augustine," *The Modern Schoolman* 65 (1988): 245–53. As Teske observes, at *On Free Choice of the Will* III.9.24 Augustine seems to concede that even God's creation of creatures who he foreknew would be eternally damned was necessary, since otherwise God would have been "envious" in failing to create all that he was capable of creating (251). I suspect that Augustine was here following Plotinus, who similarly holds that the One must produce all that it is capable of producing (*Enneads* IV.8.6, V.5.12.45–48).

44. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, 247–50, 259–62. [See also W. Matthews Grant, "Aquinas, Divine Simplicity, and Divine Freedom," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 77 (2004): 129–44; W. Matthews Grant and Mark Spencer, "Activity, Identity, and God: A Tension in Aquinas and His Interpreters," *Studia Neoscholastica* 12, no. 2 (2015): 5–61.]

view the Augustinian interpretation of predestination is not only true but is *necessarily* true, since God *could not* create creatures who are capable in any way of affecting his judgments regarding salvation and damnation.⁴⁵ Yet the Augustinian position began precisely as the attempt to exalt the divine will over all necessity. Such are the tangles one is led to by divine simplicity.

It is problems such as these which led Pascal to exclaim that the God of the philosophers is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Augustinian-Thomistic God, who is perfectly simple and fully actual, seems to be locked within a box from which he cannot escape in order to interact in any meaningful way with creatures. Plainly there needs to be some other way of understanding divine simplicity, one that does not involve these unacceptable limitations. Such a way is provided by the distinction of the divine essence and energies. The Greek Fathers think of simplicity as itself a divine energy, one of the ways in which God manifests himself in his activity. As with any energy, God is *both* simplicity itself *and* beyond simplicity as its source. Just as the sun is simple and yet possesses an indefinite multitude of rays, so nothing about divine simplicity prevents God from possessing an indefinite multitude of energies. Likewise nothing prevents these energies from being affected by creatures. The energies are precisely the realm of reciprocity, that in which God shares himself with creatures and summons them to offer themselves to him.

No doubt many questions remain to be answered. I hope I have said enough, however, to show that we have here a way of thinking about God which is both deeply traditional and worthy of serious attention.

45. See *ST* I, Q. 19, art. 5–6 and Q. 23, art. 4–5.